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ABSTRACT

SINCE LINGUISTS HAVE BEEN CONCERNED WITH A VARIETY OF APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF READING, THEIR LINGUISTIC THEORIES AND RECOMMENDED PRACTICES SHOULD BECOME FAMILIAR TO TEACHERS OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS. A NUMBER OF STUDIES HAVE EVOLVED FROM THE WORK OF LEONARD BLOOMFIELD AND CHARLES FRIES WHO FELT THAT READING COMPREHENSION WAS A PASSIVE ACTIVITY DEPENDENT UPON ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS. TO BLOOMFIELD, THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE SKILLS WAS LEARNING THE SOUND-SYMBOL CORRESPONDENCE, BASED UPON A BELIEF IN WRITING AS A SYSTEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF SPEECH; FOR FRIES, THE IMPORTANCE LAY IN LEARNING TO DISCRIMINATE VISUALLY BETWEEN WHOLE PATTERNS OR UNITS OF MEANING. A SUBSEQUENT WORK BY RICHARD L. VENEZKY CONSIDERED READING AS TRANSLATION FROM WRITTEN SYMBOLS TO SOUND, AND STUDIES BY NOAM CHOMSKY AND MORRIS HALLE EMPHASIZED A SYSTEMATIC PHONEMIC APPROACH. ALTHOUGH LINGUISTS ARE BEGINNING TO DEAL WITH THE PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF TEACHING READING, THE VARIETY OF LINGUISTIC APPROACHES, WITH OFTEN CONTRADICTORY RESULTS, SUGGESTS THE NEED FOR FURTHER FUNDAMENTAL READING RESEARCH COMBINING THE FINDINGS OF LINGUISTS, PSYCHOLOGISTS, AND EDUCATORS. (JM)

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LINGUISTIC METHOD OF TEACHING READING: IS IT A KIND OF NEO-PHONICS?

By Mamie Sizemore, ed., and Grace Blossom, ed.

For several reasons teachers of Indian students should have a great interest in the topic of linguistics and reading. We should discuss some of the difficulties involved in attempts to use insights from research in theoretical linguistics in the solution of the practical problems of teaching children to read and of understanding the reading process. Just what linguistic knowledge is relevant to helping us teach reading and how may we use the knowledge which we consider relevant? The teaching of reading is a very real problem to teachers and is also a very controversial one. Linguists who have looked at the problem have adopted a variety of different approaches because they have studied the nature of the problem differently and they have held different views about the proper nature of linguistic inquiry. Let us examine some of the different views of the reading process held by different well-known linguists and some of the solutions they have proposed.

Another reason for a close examination of their solutions is to observe some of the limitations of linguistic knowledge in solving practical problems. There are other knowledges called for and there are specific areas in which the limits of linguistic knowledge are reached. In many cases linguists have confused non-linguistic matters with linguistic ones. In plain words they set themselves up as experts in fields in which they lack expertise. This is not unique with linguists: just look around and notice how many pseudo-linguists we have among Arizona teachers. Educators are famous for speaking or writing on topics outside their field of competence with an air of authority that they assume in their own field.

The third reason we should have an interest in what the linguists have said and are saying about reading is that linguistics itself is in a state of change in its concerns, its techniques, and its rhetoric. This becomes very clear when we think back through the approaches to the reading process taken by Bloomfield and Fries and then compare them with the more recent ones taken by Chomsky and Halle.

As far back as 1925 we find Leonard Bloomfield disturbed by certain aspects of school instruction. He was especially concerned about instruction given in language and reading. You will find in the first volume of LANGUAGE which was published in that same year the following: "Our schools are conducted by persons who, from professors of education down to teachers in the classroom, know nothing of the results of linguistic science, not even the relation of writing to speech or of standard language to dialect. In short, they do not know what language is, and yet must teach it, and in consequence waste years of every child's life and reach a poor result."

Bloomfield, like many parents today, felt that the methods being used to teach his son were all wrong and revealed a lack of knowledge about the English language. He therefore devised his own method to teach his child to read. He shared his opinions, methods and materials with anyone who was interested. After his death, the book LET'S READ was published by the Wayne State Press in 1961. This book described in detail the Bloomfield system for teaching reading.

Bloomfield rejected phonics as a way of teaching reading. He referred to it as the "code-breaking" approach. In his writings he points out that the proponents of phonics confuse statements about speech with those of writing to the point they appeared to be teaching their students to speak English, when what they really were doing was teaching them to associate written symbols with already-known words. (Remember, these were children speaking English as their mother tongue.) He

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objected to breaking words up into individual letters having sound; sounding out words; and in blending sounds in an attempt to decode written words. Also, he repudiated the "whole-word" approach. This approach he claimed ignored the alphabetic nature of the English writing system in that it treated English as if it were Chinese.

Now let us examine just what he believed to be the efficient way to teach reading. First, the child should be trained in visual discrimination and then be taught to associate visually discriminated objects (letters and word shapes) to already-known sounds and meanings. Meaning of the reading material, he felt, was far less important in the initial stages of reading than the regularity of the connection between sounds and symbols--the phoneme-grapheme correspondence. Bloomfield emphasized that the child should be trained to name the letters of the alphabet without error in a left-to-right direction. This he thought would develop visual discrimination and correct word attack. Children, he felt intuitively, could segment an utterance into phonemes. Beginning readers had to learn to segment words into graphemes. The teacher's job then was to teach the children to relate the two discriminating abilities. Therefore, to state it briefly, the Bloomfield approach was based on the introduction of regular sound-symbol correspondence so that beginning readers acquired the fundamental understanding they must acquire in order to read, the understanding that writing is a representation of speech and far more systematic than many reading experts claim.

His word exercises looked something like the old "word family" lists of the nineteenth century readers. He advocated that the basic task of a child learning to read was that of understanding the spelling system of English. In his material there are lists of nonsense syllables and words. The teacher is instructed to tell the child that the nonsense syllables are parts of real words which he will find in the books he reads.

No pictures are used in his materials. He rejected the use of illustrations in reading materials on the grounds that they are either irrelevant or misleading. Thus, the children are left free to focus their attention on the words themselves rather than on the illustrations accompanying the words.

There is much to be commended in Bloomfield's pioneering efforts. His work on English phoneme-grapheme correspondence was based on an excellent knowledge of the important surface phonological contrasts in English. As stated above he stressed that the English writing system is basically an alphabetic one and it is not as inconsistent as some authorities would have us believe. Too, in his work on reading, he brought out the significant fact that the proper content of reading and the basic insights necessary to understand the reading process are to be found in linguistics rather than in social and psychological factors.

His materials abound in comments about the linguistic content of reading materials but have little to say about the actual teaching of reading. His meager comments on methodology seem to be based on extrapolation of some procedure, such as contrast, which linguists have found useful in their own field and not on procedures derived from teaching reading. You will find that type of extrapolation is characteristic of much work in applied linguistics. We cannot say that it is unique to the problem of using linguistic insights in understanding the reading process or in the teaching of reading.

LINGUISTICS AND READING (1963) by the late (and wonderful) Charles Fries is without a doubt the most scholarly book on linguistics published to date. He

points out that up until the time his book was printed, reading experts were quite unfamiliar with linguistics. In fact, in general, he found they exhibited little knowledge of language at all; consequently, he proceeded to try to correct this weakness and to offer an outline of a method for teaching reading that drew heavily on linguistic insights. People who have worked with him point out that the approach present in this book follows closely the approach behind his classic book on second language teaching, TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (1945).

Fries devoted a whole chapter in his 1963 book to the problem of clarifying the differences among the terms phonics, phonemics, and phonetics. He gave example after example of the confused use of the terms in the literature on reading. He stated:

> A linguist would insist that vocal sounds are the primary material out of which a language code is made. These vocal sounds are the phonetic features and their systematic analysis and description constitute the phonemics of the language. . . Phonics has been and continues to be a way of teaching beginning reading. It consists primarily in attempting to match the individual letters by which a word is spelled with specific "sounds" which these letters "say".

He agrees with Bloomfield on many points as to what should be presented to beginning readers. Fries considered that the children in learning to read had to master a new visual task, in which they had to associate quite automatically visual responses with previously discriminated auditory responses. He believed transfer process required visual training; for example, left-to-right eye movements and in the discrimination of important features of letters and words. Therefore, Fries rejected the concurrent introduction of both upper and lower case letters in beginning texts in favor of the use of upper case letters so as to reduce the burden of discrimination for the child learning to read. He repudiated the argument of some reading experts that the elimination of ascenders and descenders and the resultant "block" shape of words would result in the loss of many useful visual clues and would reduce the amount of visual information available to the child. In his later writings he modified this viewpoint.

He rejected the spelling out of words as Bloomfield recommended, insisting instead that the critically important skill for children to acquire is one of being able to make visual discriminations between whole words and between whole patterns or units of meaning. His method was essentially a "whole-word" method rather than a "phonics" method of the traditional kind.

In his method he stressed the importance of oral reading in the belief that the written message is but a representation of the oral method. However, his goal was still most definitely silent reading in the later stages.

Like Bloomfield, he had very little to say about comprehension. Comprehension, he believed, is basically a passive activity which is highly dependent on oral language skills. A child who is learning to read is already subconsciously aware of the different kinds of meanings and patterns in his language or he could not communicate in that language. What he needs to have unlocked for him is the code that is writing, so that he can have access to these different kinds of meanings and patterns through the medium of print.

Fries did not regard the teaching of reading comprehension as a serious one.

He took issue with wide-ranging definitions of the reading process which relate that process to social and psychological factors. He was in favor of a view of the reading process as a kind of high-speed visual recognition of meanings that are already familiar to the reader. Reading comprehension is, therefore, a specific instance of general linguistic comprehension.

There are certain valid pedagogical points which linguists have tended to ignore when they talk about reading. They ignore such matters as typography, illustrations, and attention to both storyline and characters. It is very assumptive for linguists who take an interest in reading to take it for granted that reading teachers have learned nothing from their experiences. That reading experts have shown hostility to some of the original linguistics-reading materials is not surprising when one reads some of the statements made by the linguists. Many of the statements run counter to what reading authorities consider to be pedagogically sound. Teachers have not accepted the definition of reading which makes it out to be a passive activity. This shows that the linguists lack awareness of the many problems inherent in the teaching of reading.

What has become known as the "linguistic method of teaching reading" is one which relies heavily on the work of Bloomfield and Fries. The method entails little more than the presentation of regular phoneme-grapheme, or sound-spelling relationships, in beginning reading texts, in many ways a kind of neo-phonics. The materials developed by the followers of Bloomfield and Fries reflect scarcely more than an occasional reference to any other than this solitary point that linguists have made about English.

The importance of phoneme-grapheme correspondence in beginning reading has led to a multitude of studies. These studies vary in quality and purpose.

One of the best studies was made by Richard L. Venezky and reported in the READING RESEARCH QUARTERLY [2.3 (1967) pp. 75-105.] under the title of "English Orthography: Its Graphical Structure and its Relation to Sound". He tried to relate his correspondence studies to a model of the reading process. He attempted to construct a set of rules for translating orthographic symbols into speech sounds, because he considered it useful to characterize the reading process in those terms. He has gone far beyond counting phonemes and graphemes and computing frequencies of correspondence. His work is an attempt to construct a model of the reading process which recognizes the distributions of phonemes and graphemes, the frequencies of occurrence, and the patterns of correspondence. Central to the model is a set of rules which relates all of these. He writes of the process of learning to read as follows:

> Learning to read . . . requires primarily the translation from written symbols to sound, a procedure which is the basis of the reading process and is probably the only language skill unique to reading . . . The pattern summarized here represents an ideal system for translating from spelling to sound . . .

Space in this bulletin does not permit going into how his model is worked out. However, it is well to point out some very interesting differences between such an approach and that of Bloomfield and Fries. In the first place there is a concern with a level of representation called morphophonemic, a representation which looks very much like the standard orthography. He then sets up a set of ordered rules which assign stress and convert morphophonemes sometimes into morphophonemes but always eventually into phonemes. His conversion rules are not necessarily made to

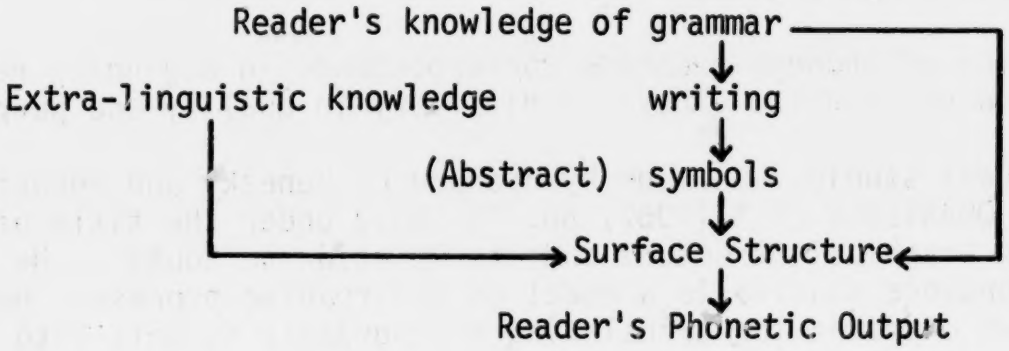
conform to the demands of the kind of evaluation measure that the generative-transformationalists insist on in their work.

He recommends presenting of the pronunciation of vowel sounds at once, such as the "a" in rat and the "a" in rate. Whether or not the child learning to read can handle this task probably depends on the pedagogy employed. The greatest weakness in his research as far as teaching reading is concerned is that his stress is on preceding writing to speech rather than in the opposite direction.

Teachers who have had the linguistic background to read and understand THE SOUND PATTERN OF ENGLISH by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle, will tell you (you may read and find out yourself) that the phonemic level of representation of so much interest to Bloomfield, Fries, and Venezky has no attraction to the above authors who regard it as no more than the methodological artifact of a particular kind of linguistic inquiry which they attack repeatedly. Chomsky and Halle favor a level of representation which they call systematic phonemic, a level which they claim written English captures well.

They state that there is nothing surprising about the fact conventional orthography is . . . a near optimal system for the lexical representation of English words. It is designed for readers who know the English language.

The following diagram shows the way they describe the process of reading aloud:



THE SOUND PATTERN OF ENGLISH is a rather convincing demonstration that it is possible to describe a vast amount of English phonology within the system the authors postulate. To the "great unwashed" as the well-known linguist Clifford Prator once called the classroom teacher, there are many ad hoc (for this work alone) decisions and exceptions in the book. Too, the main vocabulary (examples given) is of Romance origin. The authors make few claims for the truth of their system by stating it is a report on "work in progress". The question to ask yourself, then, is of what use is the system for understanding the processes involved in reading, and in particular, primary reading.

Beginning reading materials need to be filled with vocabulary of Germanic origin, possibly of a simple monosyllabic nature. Chomsky and Halle are largely concerned with a vocabulary which a beginning reader neither knows nor needs to know, and certainly should not be taught as part of the task of learning to read. This makes their work so theoretical that it is of little or no use for gaining insight at all into the reading processes. Perhaps THE SOUND PATTERN OF ENGLISH is a better book for those interested in teaching spelling than it is for those interested in teaching reading. Believe it or not, teachers, these tasks are different.

Basically, a beginning reading student needs a set of strategies for decoding print. In spite of all the research which has been done in the field, no one is sure what strategies successful readers do employ. There is reason to believe that they do not use the strategies which teachers who believe in the various phonics program attempt to teach. (If they did, there would be fewer poor readers.) These strategies, sometimes called phonic generalizations, have been severely attacked by linguists. However, Chomsky and Halle, two modern-day linguists mentioned above, point out grains of truth in these generalizations. They mention such examples as "final e's making preceding vowels 'long', i before gh having its 'long' sound, c's before e's or i's being 'soft'", and so on. Phonics instruction cannot be all wrong, linguists are beginning to believe; they still point at evidence of considerable confusion in its general orientation and they believe there is a need for a transfusion of linguistic insights!

This lengthy discussion of the work of Bloomfield, Fries, Venezky, Chomsky and Halle should lead us to certain conclusions. The first one being that some linguists at last are coming down out of their "ivory towers," and that they do have an interest in applying their theoretical knowledge to the solution of practical problems. But these proposed applications vary considerably and the results are sometimes contradictory. Linguists do not agree with each other and have different ideas about linguistics and about the nature of the problems to which linguistics might contribute a solution. Some linguists are also more definite in their proposals than others.

Fries in his writings seems to have made a definite attack on the reading problem. Chomsky and Halle have made extremely tentative suggestions about the reading process. Furthermore, the reading process itself is not an easy one to understand. Then, linguists have different notions about what language is, about how it may be described, about what its fundamental units are, about how these are related, and about what processes may operate. All of these are communication matters (linguistic matters) and all have some relevance to understanding the reading process and teaching reading. There are also non-linguistic matters which must be taken into account when we face the problems of learning and teaching, and help must be sought by the linguists from psychologists and educators before they set themselves up as experts in the field of teaching reading. The greatest need at present is grass roots research in which linguists, psychologists, and educators combine their insights in an attempt to improve all of our understanding of the reading process and the teaching of reading.

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